

Sparkling Cyanide 1945

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

Sparkling Cyanide: a simple cocktail. Just two ingredients. Champagne, a good House from a good year, such as Cliquot 1928. To this is added a little potassium cyanide. Just enough for a sip or two to be fatal. Nothing more; nothing less. In writing the novel *Sparkling Cyanide* Christie has mixed together two elements from previous novels, but she has also added a new ingredient. This novel is one of her experiments with the boundaries of the *whodunnit* genre.

One of the elements is taken from *Cards on the Table*. In that novel Mr Shaitana hosted a dinner that includes four people who, he suspects, have committed murders that have never been detected. At the end of the evening the host is dead. In *Sparkling Cyanide* Mr Barton hosts a dinner to catch a murderer. He has it carefully planned. But when he asks his assembled guests to drink a toast to his dead wife, Rosemary, it is he who slumps down in his chair 'his hands rising frenziedly to his neck, his face turning purple as he fought for breath'.

The second element is the theme of murders from the past – murders in retrospect. This is a theme that fascinated Christie in the 1940's. Almost a year before the novel opens, Rosemary Barton, née Marle, who had inherited a fortune from her godfather, died from drinking sparkling cyanide. Her sister, Iris, inherits the fortune in trust under the terms of Rosemary's godfather's will. It had been assumed that Rosemary committed suicide, but her widower husband has reason to think otherwise. He decides to find the truth – and if his wife was murdered, to find the murderer. Colonel Race tries to dissuade him – just as Miss Marple, in *Sleeping Murder*, tries to dissuade Gwenda and Giles Reed from investigating a murder that may have occurred eighteen years previously. But there is a difference. In *Sleeping Murder* the investigations of the past murders lead to further murders that would not otherwise have happened. In *Sparkling Cyanide*, by contrast, the second murder had been part of the original plan. The basic plot is a simplified version of the 1949 Hamer black comedy *Kind Hearts and Coronets*. In that film, Louis Mazzini (played by Dennis Price), sets out to murder, one by one, the eight people (all played by Alec Guinness) who stand between him and the title, and fortune, of the Duke of Chalfont. In *Sparkling Cyanide* there are only two people, or strictly speaking, three, who stand in the way of the murderer's inheritance.

Sparkling Cyanide is not simply a new combination of previously worked ideas. It is also a bold experiment. This is yet another novel in which Christie breaks a convention of the *genre* and in so doing masks the solution. And, yet again, she is fair to the reader. The breach with convention is that the murderer is a character whom the reader barely meets. Convention has it that the murderer should have more than a walk-on part. But characters can be significant even if we never meet them – Godot in Beckett's famous play, for example. Although Victor Drake is hardly ever 'on stage' he is nevertheless a significant character because we

hear so much about him, mainly from his mother, Lucilla Drake, and also from Ruth Lessing and George Barton.

Major achievements in any field tend to be made by people who are constantly thinking about their area of creative work. Scientists who keep almost always in mind the problems that they are trying to solve are able to make use of some chance happening that gives them a crucial idea. Christie, we imagine, was like this: a part of her mind continually on the look out for ideas she could put in to her novels. Perhaps one day she was sitting with others at a round table. At some point everyone left the table and when they came back they sat down, each thinking that she had returned to her original seat. But, and this is pure speculation, each had sat in the chair next to her original seat because they had oriented themselves from some item on the table, such as a handbag or a pipe, that had been moved while they were away. Whatever the stimulus, this is the idea that Christie puts to clever use. A related idea is used in *Curtain*, written a little earlier than *Sparkling Cyanide* although not published until 1975, when a significant event turns on the idea that the rotation of a round table may go undetected.

In the central scene in the book – a dinner at a posh London restaurant called *The Luxembourg* - Mr Barton drinks from his glass of champagne just before he and his guests leave the table to dance. His champagne cannot at that point contain the cyanide as the drink does him no harm. After the dancing he and his guests return to the table. He toasts Rosemary, picks up his glass, drinks and dies. The obvious motive for Barton's murder is that he was about to unmask the person who murdered Rosemary.

There is a curious piece of evidence that the reader may realise must be important but cannot think how. During the dancing a waiter comes to the empty table, picks up Iris Marle's handbag, which had dropped to the floor, and puts it back on the table. At first this evidence seems significant because the waiter may have put the cyanide in the glass. But Christie goes to considerable lengths to establish that this cannot have been the case. The waiter's action, however, is the most significant point in the novel. He put the handbag back on the table at one place-setting removed from its original position. And this results in George Barton toasting Rosemary with Iris Marle's glass. A clever point and cleverly clued, when, much later in the book, Anthony Browne, Chief Inspector Kemp, and Colonel Race, get up from a café table for a few minutes and, when they return, sit down in the wrong places and drink from the wrong cups. A clue by analogy.

In order to solve *Sparkling Cyanide* it is first necessary to realise that the intended victim of the second murder – the murder that occurs in the time frame of the novel – was not Mr Barton, the person who actually dies, but Iris Marle, younger sister to the first victim, Rosemary. Once this is understood then motives are different from what they at first seem to be. Further clues can only be identified and interpreted in the light of this central insight.

There is a second subtle clue that addresses the problem of opportunity. Just before the dancing everyone toasted Iris Marle because it is her birthday, so the

poison could not be in any of the glasses at this point. So the poison must have been introduced at some time after Iris Marle's birthday toast, and before Barton toasted Rosemary. During this time everyone was on the dance floor. No one approached the table except for the waiter who moved the handbag and who is innocent. So how could the poison have been put in the glass? The clue, the second key clue is subtle. It depends on a social convention that is observed rather less strictly now than it would have been in the 1940s. When Iris' birthday is toasted everyone around the table would have sipped their champagne, except for Iris herself. So Iris' glass – the one from which Barton sipped his fatal drink could have been poisoned before the birthday toast – before the dancing began. At that stage everyone was seated at the table, their eyes and minds focused on the cabaret.

Readers who have cracked Christie's first two clues can try and solve the puzzle either by focussing on mechanism or on motive. Of these, motive is the more fruitful.

All suspects had motive to kill Rosemary – that is why they are suspects. But who has a motive first to kill Rosemary and then Iris? The most promising approach is to follow the money. But we can't be sure who inherits (or who thinks they will inherit) if Iris dies. In the absence of any specific information about the terms of the trust under which Rosemary and then Iris inherited, or any knowledge as to whether Iris had made a will, the best guess is that Iris' fortune will pass, on her death, to her nearest relative. Since Iris is a childless orphan, and her only sister has died, it is her aunt, Lucilla Drake, who is her nearest relative. It is also possible that Mr Barton, as Rosemary's widower, might have inherited.

Throughout the novel the impression is that Ruth Lessing, Barton's highly competent secretary, is in love with her boss. Barton likes and respects her but he does not seem to be in love with her. But perhaps he is. At one point he describes her as 'the truest, dearest creature in the world' – and if that isn't love, it might have to do until the real thing comes along. Could Ruth and Barton be in it together? Inherit, marry, live happily ever after. There is one strange piece of behaviour that might cause a reader to be suspicious of Ruth.

Ruth almost certainly sees a small packet fall out of Iris' handbag, at the table at the Luxembourg and after Barton's death. This packet it turns out contains traces of cyanide. Ruth, however, says nothing. This is used by Christie as a cunning misdirection. If Ruth were the murderer or an accomplice then she would have wanted to draw attention to Iris' possession of cyanide – in order to point the finger at her. Ergo, Ruth is innocent. But if the intended victim were Iris, it is less clear what we can deduce from Ruth's silence. An innocent Ruth would probably inform the police of what she saw as it might be important evidence. A guilty Ruth might also tell the police in order to point the finger at Iris. But this might risk an investigation into who could have planted the cyanide on Iris, and a guilty Ruth might want to avoid this.

The main argument against Ruth's being Barton's accomplice, however, is that Barton would not need an accomplice. It is possible that Barton intended to kill

both Rosemary and Iris if he thought he would thereby inherit the fortune but he wouldn't need the help of Ruth.

It is more likely that it would not be Barton who would inherit on Iris' death but Iris' closest relative, Aunt Lucilla. At first sight this does not seem a promising line of thought. Lucilla is a most unlikely murderer – a kindly rather scatty talkative woman. But with Christie, of course, that is no guarantee of respectability. More problematic is opportunity. Aunt Lucilla was not present at either of the fateful dinners. So did she have an accomplice? Her son, Victor, perhaps? He is an altogether more likely villain. But he is in South America so again, no opportunity. In terms of motive, however, he seems the most likely of all. We are told many times that he frequently demands money from his mother and that had she had any to spare she would have given it to him. If she were rich, he would be rich, and in the unlikely event that she ceased to be malleable she could always meet with an accident, or commit suicide. Having considered Victor, it is clear that there is no need to involve his mother at all. With Rosemary and Iris dead Victor would effectively inherit. The stumbling block is opportunity. Could he have had an accomplice around the table?

It is difficult to work out the correct solution, but once seen much falls into place. We have already wondered whether Ruth is involved – there is that strange business with the packet that drops from Iris' handbag . Ruth as Barton's accomplice did not make sense. But Ruth as Victor's accomplice ... That is a different matter. Towards the end we are given one of Christie's teasing clues. Anthony Browne thinks he knows who the murderer is, although the reader is not privy to his suspicions. Colonel Race asks Browne whether the person Browne is considering had the opportunity. Browne replies: 'I think so. Consider for yourself how much has been taken for granted *on one person's word*'.

In light of considering that Ruth and Victor are in it together Browne's statement makes sense. The only evidence we have that Victor was in South America at the time of the murder is Ruth's evidence. Christie cleverly makes us feel as though this is a solid fact – Barton seems to know that Victor is in South America and a cable apparently from South America arrives on the day of the fateful dinner. But both Barton, and the reader, are relying entirely on Ruth's word.

If Ruth is lying Victor could be anywhere. There is another rather strange passage that becomes clear once we consider the possibility that Victor and Ruth are working together. When we first meet Ruth, Christie writes:

She [Ruth] had disliked Rosemary Barton a good deal. She had never known quite how much until that November morning when she had first talked with Victor Drake.

That interview with Victor had been the beginning of it all, had set the whole train in motion. Before then, the things she had felt and thought had been so far below the stream of her consciousness that she hadn't really known about them.

And again, much later:

It was fresh from Victor Drake's influence that she [Ruth] had listened to Rosemary's careless voice over the phone and decided that she hated her employer's wife.

Another clue, not decisive but again pointing to Ruth, is the cancellation of the appointment of Miss West. In order to carry out his rather naïve plan to unmask the murderer, Barton had hired an actress, Miss West. He arranged for her to appear, dressed as Rosemary, at the Luxembourg during the dinner immediately after the dancing. But she never turned up. We learn that that was because someone pretending to be Mr Barton had rung to say that the whole arrangement had been put off. Barton had been making these plans in secret and the only person who might have known about them would have been his trusted secretary, Ruth.

In addition to these various objective clues, the idea that Victor is the murderer, with or without Ruth, explains what is otherwise a strange aspect of the novel: the prominence of Lucilla Drake. She can hardly be considered a suspect and appears to have no function in the novel, but she is a major character.

The actual mechanism by which Victor introduced the cyanide into the champagne is the weakest part of the plot. Victor, it turns out, was dining at an adjacent table under the name, Pedro Morales, described by Inspector Kemp as a 'nasty bit of goods from Mexico – even the whites of his eyes are yellow'. He is dining with Christine Shannon, a far from stupid 'blonde lovely' – a character rather like the Marilyn Monroe of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. During the cabaret, Pedro, aka Victor, was apparently called to the telephone. After leaving his table he must have styled himself like a waiter, gone over to Barton's table whilst everyone was absorbed in the cabaret, and put the cyanide in the glass. No one notices a waiter, an idea similar to that used by G.K Chesterton in his 1911 Father Brown story *The Invisible Man*. But Victor was taking a considerable risk. Not only might he easily have been seen by one of those sitting around the table but also Christine Shannon his companion who is sitting at an adjacent table, and who is extraordinarily observant, could well have noticed. The cabaret must have been very absorbing indeed.

This one weakness apart the clues and solution are cleverly constructed. The reader can solve the puzzle and be pretty sure of having done so, but it is not easy. There are several steps that have to be taken. Realising first that Iris was the intended victim, second that her champagne could have been poisoned before the dancing, third that Victor has a motive, fourth that all we know of his movements we know only through Ruth, and fifth, once Victor and Ruth together are seriously considered, that there are several otherwise odd facts and passages that fall into place.

In several earlier novels there are discussions around the morality of killing and of letting killers go unpunished. In *Sparkling Cyanide* there is an interesting argument between a husband and wife who believe that it is possible that their daughter is the murderer. The husband, Lord Kidderminster, holds significant political power. His wife is urging him to 'pull strings' if necessary to ensure that

the police would drop any investigation that could possibly lead to their daughter being charged with murder. Lord Kidderminster is shocked and outraged at the suggestion. 'One can't do things like that,' he says, 'it would be a breach of honour'. Lady Kidderminster asks her husband whether, if their daughter were arrested and tried for murder he would 'employ the best counsel and do everything possible to get her off however guilty she was'. Lord Kidderminster says that of course he would, and adds: 'That's entirely different. You women never grasp these things'. Christie goes on to write that Lady Kidderminster was at this moment: 'willing to defend her young by any means, honorable or dishonourable'. Husband and wife, separated by different moral theories and by different passions: 'They looked at each other – so far divided that neither could see the other's point of view. So might Agamemnon and Clytemnestra have stared at each other with the word Iphigenia on their lips'.

Sparkling Cyanide is a good mix of classic Christie ingredients. Her writing is fluent, her touch sure. Except in one regard. It is known that Christie had become rather tired of Poirot in the 1940s, and tired of his success. And Miss Marple had not yet emerged as the principal alternative to Poirot. Christie uses a range of detectives in these novels written during the Second World War. Sometimes she goes back to characters from her 1920's novels. In *Sparkling Cyanide* she seems to be dithering, and to be fighting to keep Poirot at bay. The clever clues deserve Poirot's intellect. Instead we have Colonel Race, the spy from *The Man in the Brown Suit* who has aged in real time and is now a silver fox in his early sixties. We also have Chief Inspector Kemp, who was once a protégé of Superintendent Battle and is described as having many of that veteran's qualities. They pair up and it looks as though they may be the detectives. And then Anthony Browne, one of the main suspects, turns out to be gamekeeper and not poacher, links with the other two to form a triumvirate, and then breaks from the pack, does all the clever work and finally saves the girl, Iris, in the nick of time, becoming, by the end of the novel, the romantic male lead.

'I don't think I like my money very much' Iris confides to her enamorado. 'All right, sweet' he replies, 'we'll do something noble with it ... We'll give it all away ... endow homes for children, or provide free tobacco for old men.' If that last suggestion now sounds more like a criminal than a charitable act, perhaps his third idea remains valid: 'how about a campaign' he suggests, 'for serving better coffee all over England'.

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